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## DAVID WILKIE.

AN interview or acquaintance with any distinguished character of the day, generally forms an epoch in our existence; and I shall ever look back with pleasure to the circumstances of my intimacy with the subject of the present sketch, as forming one of those pleasing retrospects of the past that memory loves to dwell upon. I had an old grand-uncle once who dated every remarkable occurrence from the day his hounds ate a beggarman; the unruly dogs were not better fed than taught, and as they were hastening to the field, they met the poor old mendicant, way-worn and weary, sorrowful and despairing, tired of even life itself; so as he asked for charity, they charitably relieved him from all his earthly troubles in a trice, and for half a century after, this formed the grand epoch, the very Hegira in all my grand-uncle's calculations. Whenever anything particular occurred, the old gentleman would exclaim, "well now dam'me, since the time my hounds eat the beggarman, if I ever saw twice more than that." Perhaps I would not find it easy to establish the exact bearing of this curious circumstance upon my present object; I only bring it forward, however, as an indirect illustration of the importance we naturally attach to individual occurrences, and though mine is the more agreeable æra of the two, yet it must be allowed that my uncle's was the more original.

I was on a visit with a friend of mine, in that delightful district of Scotland called the Merse, in the southern part of Berwickshire, during the latter part of the last summer. Wilkie was expected down from London to join our party, and I looked forward with a sort of feverish anxiety to the day of his arrival: I had gone out sporting early in the morning, and on my return, I shall never forget the sensation that I felt, on being told he was above; accoutred as I was, I ran up stairs, and there I saw, leaning on an old and venerable mantel-piece, the object of my long and anxious anticipations, the cause of so many of my early associations, the unrivalled artist of the "Penny Wedding," the "Blind Fiddler," and the "Reading of the Will,"\* above all, of the "Chelsea Pensioners" reading the Gazette of the battle of Waterloo. We always form in our minds some conception or idea of the individual we are to meet; we do so naturally, and I had done it imperceptibly, for it was not until the first impression was over that I was aware of it myself. I formed my idea of Wilkie from his works, the embodied effusions of his mind, which I had identified with his person—I had fancied him a comical, dry, observant, jolly fellow, with a twinkling, leering, rolling, rollicking restless eye; now just such a person as every one else who has not seen him would imagine him to be—a fellow that would set the table in a roar, crack jokes like grasshoppers, and ring again with fun and laughter, yet not without a dash of deep, though subdued feeling, and natural pathos. In fact, I felt myself so perfectly at home with him before I saw him, that I hurried up to the parlour, determined to seize him by the hand as an old and intimate acquaintance: I bounced in, and saw to my surprise a thin, spare, delicate looking man, raise his head from his hand, and look sideways at me, as if he were half frightened; his hair was sandy, even approaching to red, and his eye brows long and bushy; his cheeks were hollow and sunken,

\* The only *English* painting in the gallery of Munich, one of the largest and finest in the world.

and his cheek bones high like those of his countrymen in general; his forehead was broad and well developed, and the hair stood up from it, as if he leaned it much upon his hand, either in thought or study; his complexion was of a sandy paleness, warmed occasionally by the hectic glow of delicacy; his eyes, "aye, there's the rub," how shall I get over them? to attempt to describe the microscopic eye of Wilkie is absolute presumption; he who has so deeply studied nature, and painted her with such fidelity: these same little speaking organs, ever defy the feeble efforts of the pen, and even set the painter at defiance. His were of a lightish grey, steady, fixed, and silent; he appeared in fact, as if he thought with them, for he always looked straight forward upon vacancy, like some highly gifted seer of the west, calling up before his double sight the blissful visions of the future; at times, however, when anything attracted his attention, they brightened up, and gleamed with peculiar brilliancy, and then it was you saw the genius bursting forth, and felt convinced of the superior order of the mind within.

My first impression, was, I confess, a feeling of disappointment, he was so different from what I had imagined him; and as he made me a side-long, awkward bow, without even looking at me, I felt that I should change my ground and win him cautiously like other men. There was something so timid and unassuming, nay, even so rustic in his manner and appearance, that for a long time I could not feel quite satisfied with his identity; I looked at him again and again without being convinced, until at length I caught him stealing one searching, penetrating glance at me, from beneath his hanging eye-brows, and that instant I recognized the man. His tone of voice is broad and national, and but little altered from his residence abroad or in England; but his manner of expression is forcible and clear, though not naturally eloquent or fluent; it is sometimes even laboured; yet there was an air of solid energy in his style, accompanied by an emphatic movement of his right hand, that absorbed your attention, and produced a great effect. His gait was upright, bold, and manly, and he looked like one who walked more for health and exercise, than for recreation and amusement. Though not so old or bulky as Sir Walter Scott, there is, notwithstanding, a strong resemblance between them, not only in manners and appearance, but also in their kindred tastes and dispositions; both the masterly delineators of the customs and habits of their native land. The social intercourse of a country-house, enabled me to gain his acquaintance and intimacy much sooner than I otherwise should have done, so that after a short time we found ourselves upon the most friendly and confidential terms possible.

The country around where we resided, was highly cultivated and beautiful; it forms one of the most romantic and interesting spots in Scotland: behind us, to the north, was that wild and dreary range of mountains, called the Lammermoors, where we would often spend whole days in wandering together. I remember one hill in particular, called the "Witches Knowe," which commanded a splendid view, and was our favourite resort; it was remarkable for being the last place in Scotland where a poor old witch was burned, and a pile of blackened stones even to this day records that gloomy act of savage superstition. As we were looking from it one fine autumnal evening, I marked the panoramic view we had of the many places of note and interest that lay around us, and we compared the former days of strife and rapine, to the happy scenes of industry and peace that mark the features of the present time. We saw the whole line of the border up to Melrose Abbey, and the Eildon hills, the scene of many a hard fought fight and bloody fray;

Halidon Hill lay under us, where Scotland reeled beneath the power of the tyrant Edward; and there were the gloomy and stupendous towers of Norham right in front, hanging over Tweed, where the haughty Marmion slept the night before the battle. Farther on, at the English side, was the fatal field of Flodden, where Scotland lost her bonny king, and England half her chivalry; and there were the halls of Twisel too, and the peaceful Till, which ran red that day with blood; and the bridge where Chester charged, and Surrey spurred, "to join the dreadful revelry;" and far to east were Bamborough Head, and Holy Island, where poor Constance de Beverly suffered for her broken vows a long and lingering death, the forsaken victim of a faithless man, and of ill-requited confidence. Berwick too, that mongrel town, lay under us, and Berwick Castle, where Isabella of Scotland pined away in a wooden cage, a melancholy instance of savage retaliation: and there was the line of the winding Tweed, twining like a vein of liquid silver, through the rich and fertile pastures of the Merse to Lauder Dale; once the source of discord and severance, now the happy bond of union, lacing the two countries more firmly together. A double line of border castles ran along its banks, even still looking like the guardians of their different lands; some were in ruins and tenantless, but others looked as yet on guard, and watching the different fords with feudal jealousy. There were the seats too of the Homes, of the Johnstones, (not, certainly, the meanest or least ancient house in Scotland, Mynheer President,) the Swintons, and the Hays, the Maitlands, the Ruthersfords, and many more, the sight of which recalled such numerous scenes of rapine, of bloodshed, and of cruelty; and there also was Hume Castle, far in the distance, perched on a rock; a fit look-out for the wardens of the Eastern Marches. The long and graceful line of the Cheviots bounded our view far away to the south, where the hardy moss-trooper often rode single and solitary, trusting to the protection of night, or the cunning of his steed for safety. To the right, again, amidst the hills and forests lay Chevy Chase, or the luckless Otterbourne, famous in border minstrelsy, where Harry Hotspur's spur grew hot, and the black Douglas yielded to him; and there was fair Melrose too, in the distance, and the seat of that real enchanter, the wizard Scott, whose charmed pen has called all these scenes into more vivid existence. There was Dunse Law too, gloomy and black, where the covenanters fought for their Kirk and won: on the very spot where we stood were the remains of that celebrated Roman road which ran through Britain from north to south, straight and unerring like a bird in its flight, traversing hills and dales, rivers and mountains, until its sturdy course is lost in trackless recesses of the northern Highlands; a living emblem in the present day of the policy and power of the ancient rulers of the world. Behind us to the north, as I have said, were those wild romantic hills, the Lammermoors, the last strong hold of border chivalry; and there too was Fast Castle, and Saint Abbs Head, the scene of that delightful tale of passion and of truth; and Ravenswood Castle still remains a melancholy record of the poor master's extremity and ruin. The sea was visible from where we stood, beating the promontory of Saint Abbs Head, where the lone and single hearted hero found amidst the treacherous footing of the Kelpies Flow, that peace to his sorrows, which this life denied him.

The time was evening, and the setting sun just sinking behind the distant Eildon Hills, threw its slanting rays along the vale beneath, giving a tone of mellowed richness to the scene, such as I have seldom

witnessed. I watched Wilkie as he studied this beautiful sight, to discover the workings of his mind within; his eyes were fixed upon it calmly and steadily, but his bushy eye-brows hung so low, that it was difficult to see the speculation in the orbs beneath; they never brightened to excess, but they appeared to receive the impression, and to treasure it deeply. "Hah!" he would exclaim, "that's good, but not sufficiently warm; the tone of that sunlight is chilly and cold, and wants the saffron richness of the southern suns: Hah! but that long black shadow from Norham Castle there is fine, and well relieved, and the shade from the clump of trees on Flodden Hill is pretty—yes, that has a fine effect; and the tints of the Cheviots too: Hah! bright but frosty; they want warmth, Sir—they want warmth." Thus did he soliloquize and criticise the scene; but his thoughts were running at the time on the rich and glowing suns of Italy, far more congenial to the poet's fancy and the painter's eye.

Wilkie had not long returned from Spain, where the scenes are laid of many of his late productions; and often in our rambles would he halt on some wild and dreary heath, to tell me of his adventures there. He arrived at Madrid sick and solitary, after a tedious journey from the frontiers: he had a few letters, but no friend or acquaintance; and he soon fell into a state of nervous melancholy, arising from solitude, in an unknown land. He was walking along the shady side of a street one day, gloomy and sad, and planning a speedy departure, when his attention was attracted by the figure of a stranger like himself, who stared at him, and in one instant they were in each other's arms. This was no other than Washington Irving. They were old and attached friends; and the meeting of two such kindred spirits in such a place, and at such a moment, was naturally hailed with delight by both. Irving remained by him for nearly seven months, and Wilkie soon rallied his health and spirits, under the genial influence of intellectual friendship, kindness and attention. He described Irving to me as a being of superior order, with every quality that can grace or dignify man, and render his society delightful. Amiable, timid and retiring, he must be sought, to be known—for true merit, like the richest ore, usually lies deepest in the mine. He was in great favour at the time with the court of Madrid, and commanded all the advantages that Wilkie could possibly desire. I never felt tired of listening to their rambles and adventures, the scenes were so little known, and the subjects of such interest. They visited the Escorial together, the finest palace in the world; and Wilkie became quite a different man, as he described to me the rich and valuable store of wonders that he found there. The first time they saw it was amidst the glare and gaudy trappings of the court—the next, when the numerous halls of the mighty pile were solitary and deserted. They spent many days there wandering about, studying with delight the exhaustless treasures that were crowded around them; the works of Velasques, Morales, and Murillo, and many other less celebrated masters of the Spanish school, were heaped together in wild profusion: the exclusive labours of Titian for five years of his valuable life, and the matchless frescoes of Luca Jordano, so seldom visible to a stranger's eye. They visited the heights of Granada, too, together, and the stupendous halls of the Alhambra, and they found in these records of the barbarian Moor, more to please the eye and gratify the senses, than in the gorgeous superstition of their more orthodox neighbours.

In society Wilkie is silent and reserved—shunning observation with a sort of bashful awkwardness, and avoiding all topics that touch upon his fame or notoriety. The natural nervousness of his disposition, joined to

rather a delicate state of health, encreases this, so that at first he does not appear to advantage; but as this reserve wears off, and he begins to feel himself at-home, he becomes one of the most rational and agreeable men I ever met. The turn of his mind is of a contemplative and philosophic cast—appearing to have studied books deeply, but nature more. His analysis of the feelings and passions of mankind frequently displayed a depth of knowledge and enquiry, such as I have seldom met with; and though not deeply skilled in any single branch of metaphysical or moral science, I cannot but consider him entitled to first-rate mental rank amongst the others of his highly gifted countrymen. His temper is good, though sadly tried by illness, arising from over application; and the natural turn of his disposition is amiable and philanthropic in the extreme. High-minded, generous and manly, he has risen to the top of his profession by the exercise of his talents alone—a height seldom attained by unobtrusive merit like his; and he now stands unrivalled, beloved, and respected, by all who know him. Wilkie has mingled much amongst the aristocracy both of rank and talent—the friend of the late lamented Lawrence; the constant inmate of Howard castle, and Holland house; the object too of royal patronage and friendship; he has however not been fortunate in life—and even before the ink in my pen is dry, he may, alas! be deprived of his best and truest benefactor. He had lately returned from one of the above-mentioned noble mansions; and in our social hours, of an evening, he amused us much by describing the scenes he witnessed there. Charades had been the favourite amusement, and in these he delighted; so we determined to get up some ourselves under his direction. Wilkie caught at the idea eagerly; and as his spirits rose, his mind relaxed, and I saw him in a different light completely. He was playful and artless, and merry as a child; and joined our groupes, and arranged and settled them; and painted our faces, and rummaged the house from top to bottom in search of dress and paraphernalia: nothing could equal the skill with which he settled every thing—choosing the parts, and grouping the characters after some of his favourite pictures. He also excelled in all those different plays and lighter amusements which constitute the pleasure of social life, and relieve the tedium of the country; and were it not foreign to my present purpose here to describe these scenes more accurately, I could afford much interest to the reader by an account of some of them.

He had a room devoted exclusively to himself, and there it was that I enjoyed the most agreeable hours of his society; even while I was beside him he made many sketches, pregnant with intellect and genius. One was of the Duke of Wellington in his tent, the night before the battle of Waterloo. He was represented sitting at a table, writing, with a lamp before him, and the light thrown strongly from beneath the shade of it upon his countenance: an orderly was in the side ground, receiving directions or giving information, and the characteristic calmness of the hero is well preserved, as he ponders on the approaching conflict. The face of the duke, though rudely sketched in chalk and water colours, is fine in the extreme; and as he promised to sit for this picture, it may hereafter prove an interesting one. He told me he often wished to paint a series of historical portraits, and Nelson's among the rest—but he could not fix on a situation for him. I suggested to him, "the Battle of Copenhagen," where he was sending the letter to the Crown Prince, and amidst the din and turmoil of the fight, the hero asked for sealing wax, to show that they were not hurried. He was pleased with the idea instantly; and then described with energy the moment so pregnant

with interest and danger; the figure of Nelson calmly affixing the seal, and turning to those around him, saying—"This is no time, you see, to be informal, or in a hurry." This subject now forms the ground-work of one of his late productions.

Wilkie's greatest horror was a lady's album; and I well remember his consternation one day, when he saw one that I had left upon his table: he told me he knew what it was by intuition, and he appeared nervous and fidgetty the whole day after; however, I was soon enabled to return it, with a fine bold sketch of a Spanish bandit and his spouse, to the fairest maid and the largest fortune in Scotland. He delights in a pun, and was always manufacturing them: a conundrum, too, afforded him infinite pleasure. Often at dinner did we see him labouring, until with eyes brightened up, and muscles relaxed, he was delivered of his *mot*. I remember one in particular, for which he gave himself great credit: there was a servant in the house called Hopkirk, and his name was a great source of amusement. "Tell me," said he, one day, "if Hopkirk fell while crossing the river, what would he be?" "Why, perhaps, he'd be drowned," said I. "No, he'd be *Fal-kirk*;" and he appeared delighted when he said it.

All the little mental idiosyncracies peculiar to the inhabitants of our own green isle surprised and amused him highly; and in my efforts to gratify him upon these points, I often, no doubt, indulged somewhat freely in that prerogative of our nation, the art and mystery of bulls, puns and blunders. He seldom at first perceived the precise drift of my patriotic exertions, but when he did, he always examined the most trifling ebullitions with all the critical accuracy of a philosopher; and seemed to treasure them up for some future occasion.

He often expressed to me his unwillingness and inability to fill any public situation which required labour or attention: and I well know it was strongly against his wish that he was put in nomination for the Presidentship of the Royal Academy. His present state of health would never allow him to fill it; and I must say, I do not consider him qualified, either by his habits or the natural bent of his mind, for a post of such peculiar difficulty. It has been my good fortune to have also known the late lamented President, and the striking contrast between the two is almost conclusive on the subject. Lawrence was courtly, calm, and dignified—with an eye that would fascinate, and a voice of the softest and sweetest melody; the other is bashful, retiring, and nervous—timid in manner, and Scottish in accent. The one was formed more than any man I ever saw, by the purity of his style, and the classic elegance of his deportment and delivery, to fill the post he occupied; while the other, though more deep and profound, appeared too laboured and cold, to keep alive the attention. The discourses of the one were more fitted for the class; those of the other would answer best in the closet: yet I cannot help thinking that the higher branches of the art, in which he excels, would have gained more by his appointment than by the present one; and that the English school of painting would soon have acquired that historical turn, and purely natural style, in which Wilkie now stands unrivalled.